

RILA

MONASTERY





Schematic plan of the Rila Monastery region, the transportation links with Sofia and the adjacent convents, churches and holy grounds: 1. The Orlitsa Convent. 2. The Pchelino Convent. 3. The tomb of St John of Rila. 4. St Luke's Hermitage. 5. The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Burial Ground Church.

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The RILA MONASTERY is situated in Southwestern Bulgaria, 117 km away from Sofia and 40 km away from Blagoevgrad. Rising at 1147 m above sea-level, it lies amidst some of the most scenic recesses of the Rila Mountains, to which the monastery owes its name. On either side it is flanked by the swift and clear flowing rivers of Rilska and Drushlyavitsa. The Malyovitsa peak, reaching a height of 2729 m, is within a four hours walking distance and within as many again is the Rila's highest point - Mount Moussala, rearing to 2925 m.

According to some sources, the Rila Monastery was founded in the 10th century by the monk hermit John of Rila who dwelt in a stone cave not far from the monastery's main complex. The originator of the Rila foundation, who lived during the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Peter (927-968), was raised to sainthood by the grateful Christians in sign of homage to his lifework. The disciples of John of Rila, who lived at that same time, should also be merited for the creation of the monastery.

In the Middle Ages the Bulgarian rulers showed great interest in the personality of the monk and the Rila cloister of which John of Rila's life history gives valuable evidence. Byzantine and Bulgarian writers composed or made copies of sections of his lives which gave an account of moments of historical significance in the political, social and cultural life of these ages. The Bulgarian tsars Ivan Assen II (1218-1241), Kaliman I (1241-1246), Ivan Alexander and Ivan Shishman (1371-1393) made lavish gifts to the monastery. The Donation Deed of Tsar Ivan Shishman of 1378, which has been preserved until this day at the monastery museum, attests to the privileges that the monastery enjoyed and the extension of its estates. All through the 12th-14th centuries there was an upsurge of the monastery's cultural and artistic activities. Talented writers, painters and master-builders have left fascinating manuscripts, church and residential buildings, frescoes of high artistic value, remarkable works of the applied arts, woodcuts, church plates and icon paintings.

The fall of Bulgaria under the Turks at the turn of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries made the maintenance of the monastery's normal ways of spiritual life difficult, due to which it lost much of its power and influence in public life. Towards the mid-15th century it was plundered, set on fire and destroyed. The monastic life declined.

The turn of the 15th century witnessed the rebirth of the Rila establishment to a new spiritual and cultural life. The relics of John of Rila were transferred from the ruined royal city of Turnovo back to the Rila Monastery with the help of the three brothers clergymen David, Theophan and Ioasaph. Managing to procure a special deed from the Sultan of Constantinople, in 1466 they signed a compact for mutual assistance between the Rila Monastery and St Pantheleimon Monastery in Mount Athos. The original copy of this document is now treasured at the monastery museum. The transfer of John of Rila's relics was described by an eye-witness - Vladislav the Grammarian, in a remarkable writing.

The relationships with Russia were intensified. In 1558 many monks from the Rila Monastery travelled to Russia and gathered donations in the form of money, church plates, vestment and books. In the 16th and 17th centuries the ties with the neighbouring states of Serbia, Romania, Greece and mostly, with the Slav monasteries in Mount Athos, were also expanded.

When Bulgaria fell under Ottoman rule in the 15th century the Rila Monastery was subordinated to the authority of the Bulgarian and Turnovo Patriarchate. Until 1766 it was within the diocese of the Ipek and Constantinople Patriarchate and up to 1870 when the Bulgarian Exarchate was proclaimed.

The National Revival Period in the 18th and 19th centuries gave a new impetus to the resurgence of the Rila cloister. Reconstructed, renovated and protected from the Turkish conquerors, the monastery turned into a centre of spiritual, cultural and economic revival. Thousands of worshippers, donors, builders and painters made their way to it. Church-donors from Koprivshtitsa, Teteven, Chirpan, Stara Zagora, Gabrovo, Samokov, Sofia gave financial support for the construction or furnishing of complete premises, presented painted decoration, icons and church plates, a proof of which are the many names and portraits that have come down to us.

The present-day appearance of the monastery is from the 19th century. The construction of the residential buildings started in 1816. Spread on an area of 8800 square metres in the shape of an irregular quadrangle, they form an enclosed ensemble. Rising in the middle of the courtyard is a high stone fortress tower built by the local feudal Sebastocrator Hrelyu in 1334-1335, and a small church dated to 1343. In 1844 added to the tower was a small belfry. Later on, the monumental building of the monastery's Principal Church of the Nativity of the Virgin was erected where the old Hrelyu Tower had once stood. It was built by master Pavel Ivanovich in 1834-1837, planned as a five-dome church with three altar niches, two side chapels and an open gallery. The impressiveness of the interior is strengthened by the richly decorated walls, a great diversity of compositions depicting religious scenes, and a unique woodcut iconostasis with azure fretwork. Abundant light penetrating through the openings beneath the domes and the walls illuminates the mural paintings, gold-plated fretwork, lanterns and candlesticks thus lending optimism to the spiritual atmosphere as a whole. There is not less audacity in the master's approach to the plastic forms of the church's exterior. The three-curved balance-beam pediment is remarkable, crowning the church together with the three domes clearly emphasized above the roof. The open arcade gallery with stone columns and exquisitely curved arches with ornamental inscriptions, blind cupolas and a gallery of pictorial scenes representing subjects from the Gospel invite one to enter the temple. The execution of the monumental mural paintings carried on the traditions of the mediaeval art, yet the new age set its mark in the way of colour, purity of line and realism in the characteristic trend of the Bulgarian Revival Period. The individual stroke marks of many painters can be discerned in the frescoes of the principal church but only Zahari Zograph has signed and dated his works - 1844. By 1846, when the painting of the principal church was completed, the names of many other artists had already been entered into the monastery

chronicles, noteworthily Toma Vishanov, Stanislav Dospevski, Hristo Dimitrov, Dimiter and Simeon Molerovs.

The construction of the residential wings surrounding the monastery was carried out in several stages. The northern wing was built in 1816-1817, the eastern - in 1817, and the western - in 1819 by master Alexi Rilets. A big fire in 1833 destroyed part of these buildings but as soon as the following year the monastic brotherhood, as well as many Christians, master-builders and painters came to the aid and managed to rebuild and finish off the construction of the edifice to its present-day appearance. In 1846-1847 master-builder Milenko raised the southern wing and encircled the big monastery courtyard. In 1960 the state restored the half-ruined southeastern wing which now houses the monastery museum.

The four-storeyed residential buildings, in which there are about 300 monastic cells, four chapels, an abbot's room, a refectory, a kitchen, a library and guest rooms intended for the donors from Koprivshtitsa, Teteven, Chirpan, and a number of premises for household activities, give the irregular quadrangle shape of the enclosed monastery courtyard. The exterior of the monastery complex is severe and impressive. Stone walls rise to the height of four and more storeys, cut through by small barred windows. Only the two gateways with sturdy oak iron-bound wings suggest an access to an intimate and enchanting world filled with unique specimens of architecture and art. Although the construction was executed in several stages by different master-builders, the architectural ensemble is in perfect harmony as a whole. The four-storeyed residential buildings overlook the inner courtyard with verandahs, stone arches and columns, artistically shaped projections and corbels. Bold solutions in design and architecture model the diversity and uniformity of forms, of the utilitarian, the spiritual and the aesthetic thus creating the fantastic world of the Rila cloister.

The big monastery kitchen in the northern wing is a remarkable, unique work of the art of architecture and building. Planned as a solid pyramidal tower, it rises the whole height of 22 metres of the four storeys. On the ground floor four solid arches on square foundations bear its weight, going up higher through four rows of arches on an octagonal base. The highest point of the kitchen juts out above the roof of the residential wing in a solid cupola.

Walled up in the residential structures between the monastic cells are four chapels built after the pattern of the cross-of-dome churches with blind domes. Resting on a drum, only the dome of the Sts Sava and Simeon Chapel dominates the roof. On the first floor, above the eastern gateway, is the St John the Theologian's Chapel; on the second floor is the Chapel of Sts Sava and Simeon; St John the Baptist's Chapel is above the western gate and right above it, in the western wing, is the Holy Archangels' Chapel. Church-donors have greatly contributed to the painting of the chapels' walls, domes and vaults. Master-builders, artists and wood-carvers from Samokov, Bansko and Debur created remarkable works of art distinguished for their realism of drawing, true-to-life images, vivid colours and harmony of the sophisticated colour scheme. There is a diversity of compositions and subjects. The narthex of the Holy Archangels' Chapel for example, features some less popular saints

depicted by Samokov painters who have thus given vent to their feelings of nationality. The donors' portraits, executed by Dimitar Molerov, reveal the realistic trends of the Bansko artistic school. The portrait of Maria is one of the most truthful works of the 19th century art. Renowned master-woodcarvers of the Tryavna and Mount Athos schools have shared in the artistic shaping of the Rila Monastery's iconostases, ceilings, verandahs and their projecting parts. Unique pieces of the art of wood-carving have been preserved at the monastery museum. The door of the old 14th century Hrelyu Church was made with great artistry, incorporating interlacing ornaments. Since the demolition of the church in 1834 this unique piece of art has been treasured at the monastery museum. The iconostasis of the principal church is remarkable for its magnificent relief ornamentation, stylized floral elements, symbolic human and animal images; dragons symbolizing triumph over evil, biblical scenes and images of lions, monsters and storks. The woodcut motifs also feature the Bulgarian, Russian and Serbian coats of arms, while the big royal tier represents ten icon paintings, two of which are dated to 1837. The monastery museum houses still another unique specimen of the art of wood-carving. This is the cross made of a whole piece of wood 81 cm x 43 cm in size. The Raphael's Cross, which bears the name of its creator, was made in the latter half of the 18th century by Monk Raphael whom it took twelve long years to complete in 1802. Interwoven in the miniature woodwork are 104 religious scenes and 650 small figures. The master used very fine chisels, small knives and magnifying glass in his work, and therefore lost his sight when he finished the creation.

Several more churches, chapels and holy grounds, situated in the proximity of the central buildings, also belong to the Rila Monastery complex. The Orlitsa Convent (15th-19th centuries) is on the route from the town of Rila to the Rila cloister. Round a small courtyard there is a one-storey residential building, a kitchen and the Church of Sts Peter and Paul dating from 1491. The church has preserved interesting pictorial compositions, bearing the spirit of the 14th century art and featuring the scenes of the Assumption of the Virgin, the Transfiguration, the Ascension, the Virgin Horanta and the impressive Transfer of St John of Rila's Relics of 1863.

To the east of the monastery is the old Hermitage of the Assumption of St John of Rila. In 1811 Toma Vishanov, a painter from Bansko, decorated it with wall paintings depicting scenes from the saint's life.

Some 200 metres south of the monastery is the Presentation of the Virgin Ossuary of 1795, situated in the churchyard and covered all over with murals betraying the transition from the Middle Ages to the National Revival Period.

Three kilometres east of the Rila Monastery is the St Luke's Hermitage. Round a big courtyard is the school of Neophyt of Rila (1843), the Church of St Luke (1798-1799), built on donations from Ivan Kalpakchi - a craftsman from Stara Zagora who later became Monk Ignatius. The walls and vaults of the church are decorated with scenes from the Church Feasts and Passions, the Zodiac, Christ the Almighty, the portrait of Monk Ignatius and the Last Judgement monumental composition, displaying 35 scenes and many separate human figures. The second church - the Shroud of the Virgin (1805), was built by master-builder Mihail from the town of Rila. It is a one-nave stone

structure with an apse. The walls and the vault were adorned with murals in 1811 by Toma Vishanov. Prominent among these are the portrait of Deputy-Abbot Theodosius - a church-donor, the Trials of the Soul composition telling about man's sins and virtues through the expressiveness of pictorial art, and the Virgin's Seven Virtues.

At a distance of four kilometres west of the Rila Monastery is the Pchelino Convent. Its residential wings were raised in the 19th century, while the one-nave stone Church of the Assumption with an apse is of an earlier date. The building was painted by Dimitar Molerov in 1834-1835 with the help of Monk Sebastian and his disciple Raphael from the Rila Monastery. They were portrayed on the western wall of the naos. The Virgin - Queen of Heaven with the Newborn Christ Enthroned and the Last Judgement are truly remarkable compositions. The icons were painted in 1789 by Monk Zahari.

The Rila Monastery treasures some of the most impressive icon paintings created in the 14th-19th centuries as a special favour for the cloister. The portrait of the monastery's patron - St John of Rila, was most frequently painted. Among a diversity of depicted subjects distinguished for their artistry of the highest order are the icons of St Arsenius (14th-15th centuries), the Assumption, the Candlemas, St George Enthroned (15th-16th centuries), John the Precursor, Archangel Michael, Christ Enthroned (17th century), St John of Rila with Lives (17th-18th centuries), St John of Rila and John the Precursor (1796), St John of Rila and His Nephew Luke, the icon paintings at the Pchelino Chapels (1791), the Holy Archangels (1786), and the Orlitsa Convent. A great source of interest are the six icons painted by Monk Zahari in 1789, richly plated with gold: Christ the Almighty, the Holy Virgin, St George, St John the Baptist, the Assumption and St John of Rila.

During the Ottoman rule (15th-19th centuries), the Rila Monastery turned into a centre of spiritual, cultural and literary self-preservation and revival of the Bulgarian spirit and nationality. It was a place where old relics were kept and new works of art were created, and copies of mediaeval Bulgarian authors, representing mainly the Turnovo and Mount Athos schools, were made. These were the Roman Panegyric (1479) of Vladislav the Grammarian, the eulogies of Mardari of Rila (1483 and 1509), the Hexameron of John the Chrysostom (1480), canons and lives of St John of Rila (end of the 15th century). In the 15th century a laudatory life of St John of Rila was written by D. Kantakuzine and the Rila Narrative by Vladislav the Grammarian. During the 16th-17th centuries new works continued to be created at the Rila Monastery and new copies to be made, while during the National Revival Period (18th-19th centuries) schools and centres of learning were established where Joseph Bradati was a teacher, and Neophit of Rila and Theophan of Rila were pupils. In 1839-1848 Hieromonk Neophit of Rila became twice the monastery's abbot. He also taught at the monastery school, which trained teachers and clergymen to serve the needs of the whole country. Neophit of Rila was the first ever teacher at the Gabrovo High School, founder of the Bulgarian secular education.

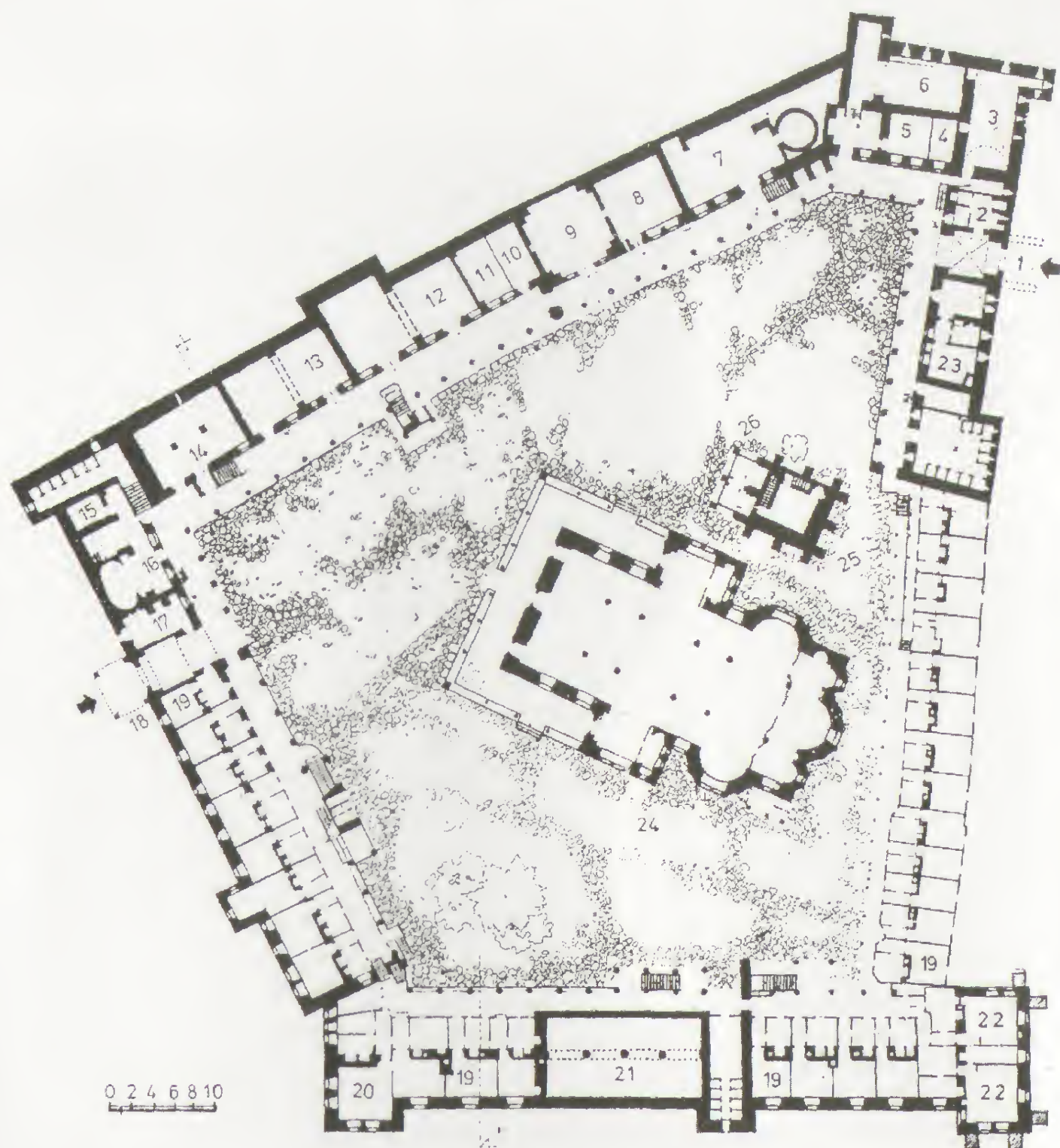
After the liberation of Bulgaria from the Turkish invaders, the Rila Monastery acquired new rights and made headway in its cultural and economic development. In 1976 it was declared a national historical reserve, and in 1983 it was included into the UNESCO list of the world cultural and historical heritage.

ABBOTS OF THE RILA MONASTERY

- 941 Hieromonk GREGORY, the favourite pupil of St John of Rila who, before going to live in the seclusion of a cave, designated Brother Gregory as his successor at the monastery, saying thus: "...And now I leave the beloved Brother Gregory to be a preceptor and Father Superior in my stead..."
- 1195 Hieromonk IOANIKIUS, at the time of the transfer of St John of Rila's relics from Sofia to Turnovo. The Accompanying Life History reads as follows: "Along with them there also walked the monks from his Holy Monastery - Abbot Ioanikius..."
- 1385 Abbot DOMETIAN, who managed to conceal church plates, manuscripts and other valuables in the monastery surroundings to prevent them from falling into the hands of the invading conquerors from Asia. Dometian was honest and learned man, wise and judicious.
- 15th century Hieromonk IOASAPH, who initiated the monastery's restructuring; died on May 20, 1463.
- 15th century Hieromonk DAVID, brother of Hieromonk Ioasaph. Full of energy, he signed a compact with the Russian Monastery of St Pantheleimon in 1455 and succeeded in bringing the relics of St John of Rila from Turnovo back to the Rila Monastery on July 2, 1469.
- 1584 Abbot CALLISTUS, who stood at the lead of a delegation to Russia at the time of Feodor Ivanovich.
- 1628 Archimandrite STEPHEN, led a delegation to Russia in 1628, at the time of Mihail Romanovich. Member of the delegation also was Deputy-Abbot Arsenius, author of the entreaty to the Russian Tsar, written on December 7, 1627.
- 18th century Abbot GERASIMUS, who after 1777 renovated the monastery buildings, the church, the chapel of the Hrelyu Tower, the iron gate (1784) outside the monastery; raised in 1795 the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Church at the monastery burial ground with the funds of the Samokov Metropolitan Bishop Filotheus, and the St Luke the Evangelist Church in 1799 aided by Monk Ignatius.
- 19th century Abbot GAVRIL, who in 1805 built the Shroud of the Virgin Church at the St Luke's Hermitage, decorated with paintings in 1811, the fountains at the Orlitsa Convent and the Samokov gateway in 1816.
- 1816-1818 Abbot IOASAPH, who renovated the northeastern wing as well as the northern wing with the kitchen assisted by master Alexi from the village of Rila.
- 1819-1820 Abbot ISAIAH, who continued the

construction undertaken by master Alexi. In 1819 he built the Doupnitsa gate and the kitchen. In 1820, with funds from Hieromonk Cornelius and townsmen from Shtip, the church above the tomb of St John of Rila was raised.

1766-1860	Archimandrite JOSEPH THE BUILDER, born in the town of Batak. He restored the monastery after the fire on January 13, 1833.
1860-1864	Hieromonk NEOPHIT OF RILA (1793-1881), founder of the Bulgarian secular education, the first ever teacher at the Aprilov School in the town of Gabrovo; philologist, translator, writer, painter, a man of encyclopaedic knowledge.
1864-1868	Archimandrite PANTHALEIMON
1875-1881	
1868-1870	Hieromonk CYRIL
1881-1883	
1883	Hieromonk THEODOSIUS
1884-1886	Archimandrite THEOPHILAK
1886-1893	Hieromonk IOASAPH
1904-1907	
1894-1896	Hieromonk NICHEPHORUS
1896-1899	Archimandrite KESSARIUS
1899-1904	Archimandrite IOANIKIUS
26 Nov 1907 - 26 Nov 1908	Hieromonk PAISSI
26 Nov 1908 - 8 Jan 1914	Hieromonk PHILARET
8 Jan 1914 - 17 July 1917	Archimandrite EUGENY
1919-1921	Hieromonk MAXIM
1921-1922	Hieromonk SOPHRONIUS
1 Jan 1922 - 6 Feb 1922	Hieromonk SERAFIM
23 Aug 1922 - 21 Feb 1924	Archimandrite ANTHONY
27 June 1924 - 29 Sept 1924	Hieromonk AVERKIUS
29 Sept 1924 - 1 Jan 1929	Leukius Bishop VARLAAM
1 Jan 1929 - 1 Sept 1933	Archimandrite CYRIL
1 Sept 1933 - 12 Nov 1936	Archimandrite FLAVIAN
1 Jan 1938 - 1 Sept 1938	
1 Jan 1936 - 1 Jan 1938	Archimandrite CLEMENT
1 Sept 1938 - 10 Dec 1944	Archimandrite NATHANAIL
1944-1948	Archimandrite KALYSTRAT
20 Apr 1949 - 18 Nov 1961	Stobius Bishop VARLAAM
1 Nov 1968 - 31 Oct 1970	Dragovititsa Bishop IOAN
1 Nov 1970 - 31 July 1971	Archimandrite KALENIK
1 Aug 1971 - 15 Dec 1972	Archimandrite NESTOR
15 Dec 1972 - 31 June 1977	Archimandrite METHODIUS
1 Aug 1977 - 30 Nov 1982	Bishop GELASIUS
1 Dec 1982 - 30 June 1985	Archimandrite GALAKTION
1 July 1985 - 30 June 1988	Smolyan Bishop NESTOR
1 July 1988 - 1997	Dragovititsa Bishop IOAN



Rila Monastery. Plan of the ground floor after P. Kalchev:

1. Eastern (Samokov) gate; 2. Monastery guards' room; 3. The mills; 4. Place for offenders; 5. Isolation hospital; 6. Storeroom at the mills; 7. Oven; 8. Preparation room; 9. Monastery kitchen; 10. Cell of the monastery cooks; 11. Storeroom for foodstuffs; 12. Winery; 13. Storeroom for sour cabbage and pickled vegetables; 14. Cheese-making room; 15. Storehouse; 16. Communion bread bakery; 17. Monastery guards' room; 18. Western (Doupnitsa) gate; 19. Cell of the monk gate-keeper; 20. Abbot's room; 21. Space above the refectory; 22. Hospital; 23. Cells; 24. The principal (cathedral) church; 25. The Hrelyu Tower; 26. Belfry and a shop.



Rila Monastery - general view from southeast. The monastery complex is surrounded by three- and four-storeyed residential buildings. The big courtyard is paved with cobbles. Right in the middle are the principal church and the Hrelyu Tower. The silhouette of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church (1834-1837) is dominated by the three big domes of the church nave and two more, which are smaller, placed above the side chapels. Next to the church's northern facade is the stone fortress tower raised in 1334-1335 by Sebastocrator Hrelyu, whose name it bears. A small belfry and a shop were added to it in 1844.



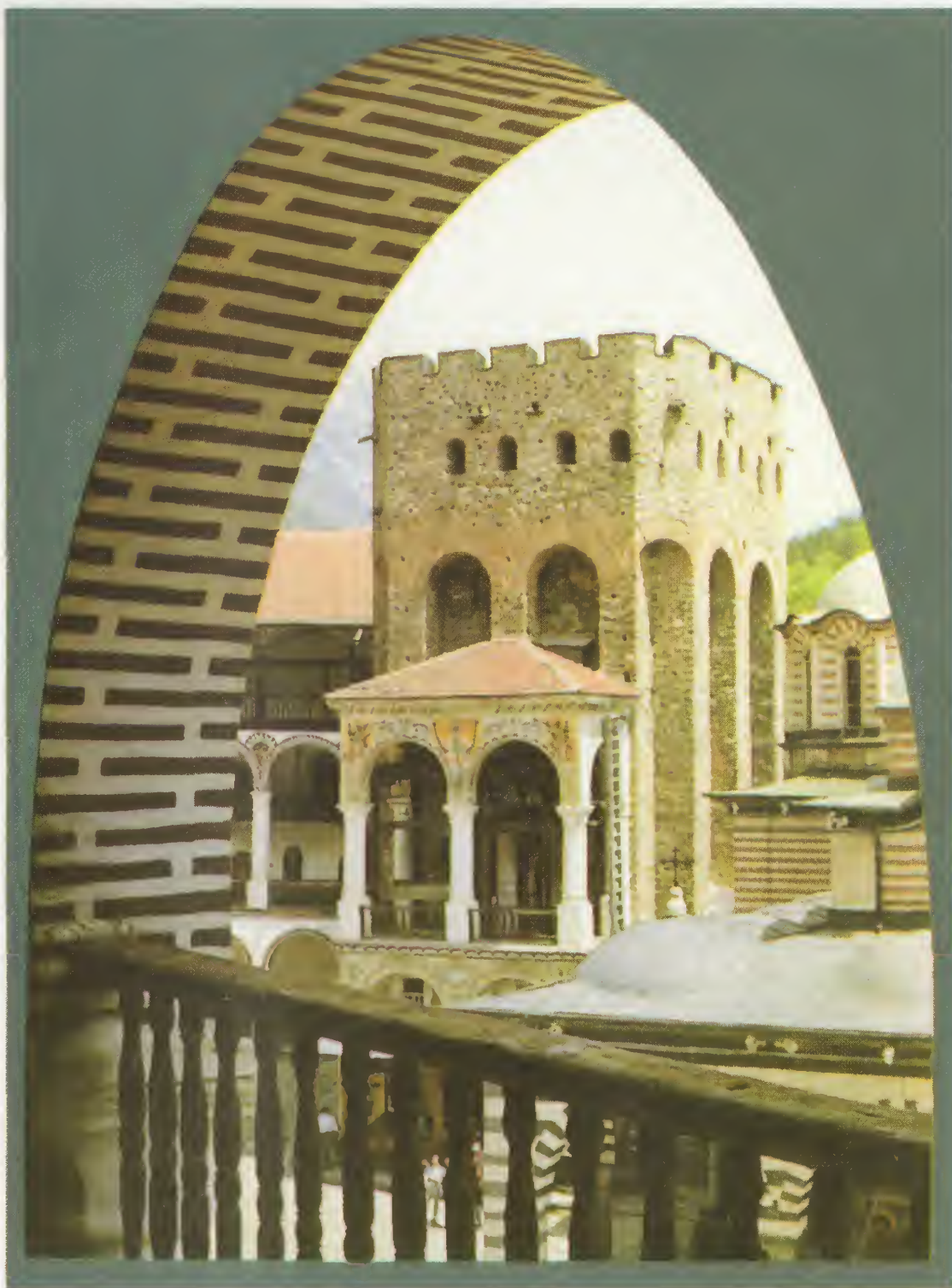
General view of the Rila Monastery melt into its magnificent natural surroundings.

Panorama view of the monastery buildings ensemble. The Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church (1834-1837) is in the foreground.



Mural paintings at the open gallery of the Principal Church



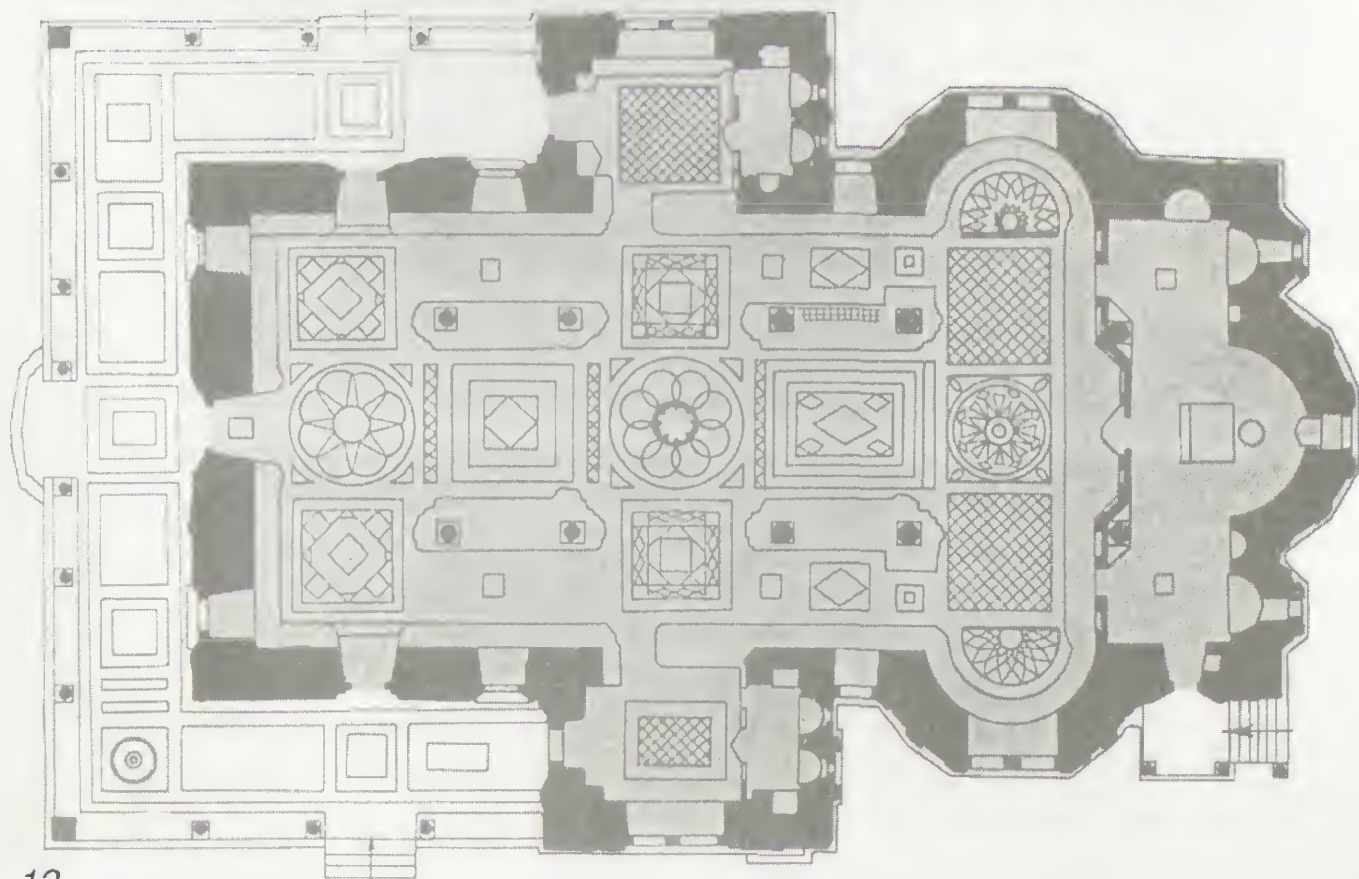


View of the western facade of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church and the Hrelyu Tower. In the foreground is the open arcade gallery and the three-curved balance-beam pediment with one of the three big domes crowned with exquisitely made metal crosses. Rising next to the church is the mediaeval stone Hrelyu Tower of 1335, and the belfry annexed to it in 1844. Part of the northeastern residential wing is in the background; situated in it are the guest rooms, remarkable for their artistic arrangement, built on donations from the Christian communities in the towns of Koprivshtitsa, Teteven and Chirpan.



Picturesque architectural ensemble in the Rila Monastery's courtyard.

Plan of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church (1834-1837).





Ceiling of the Koprivshtitsa room decorated by master-woodcarvers and painters from Samokov and Bansko in mid-19th century.

General view of the interior of the Koprivshtitsa room from the mid-19th century.





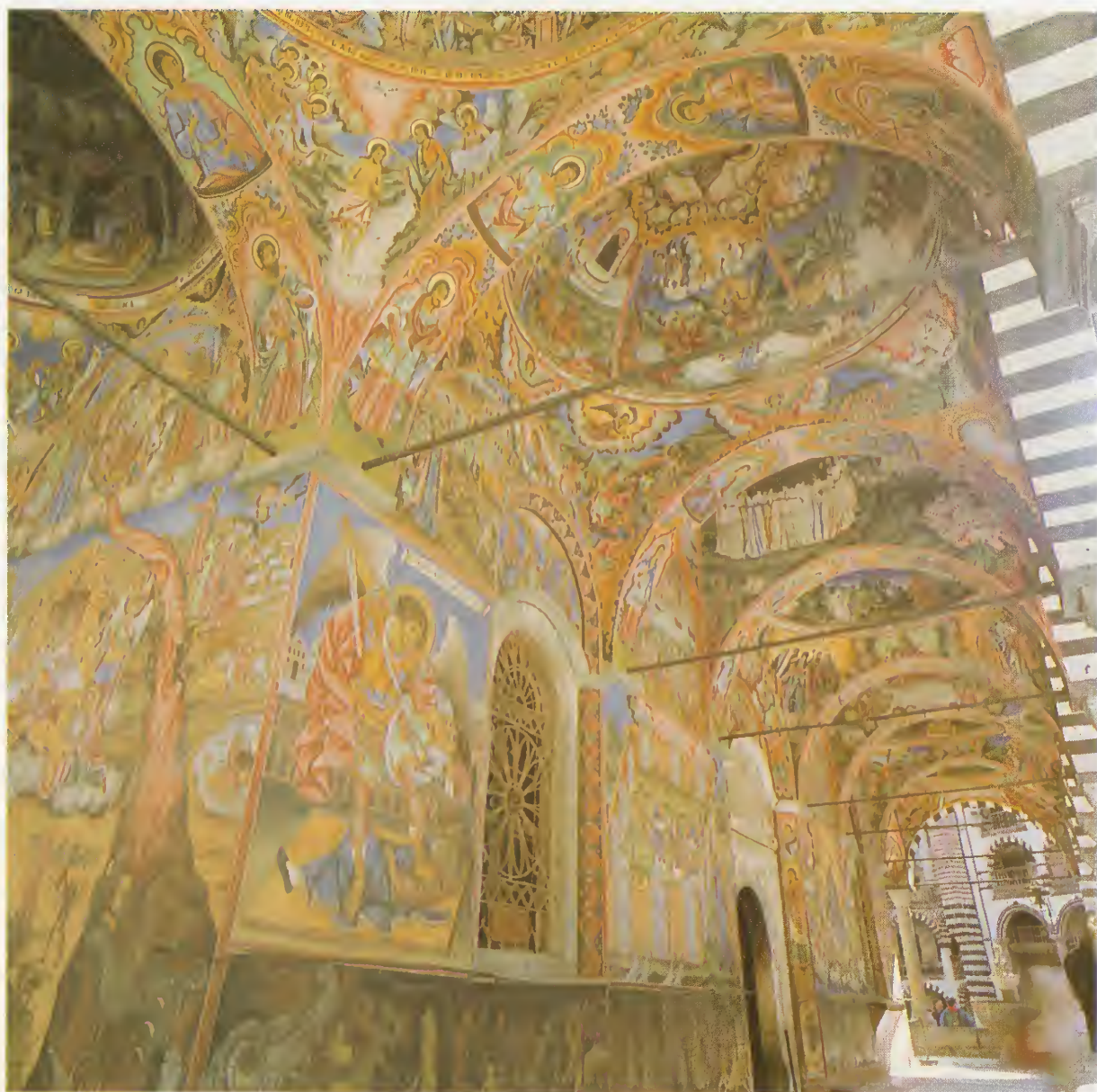
The Hrelyu Tower was erected at the time of Sebastocrator Hrelyu in 1334-1335, and served for defensive purposes. Planned in the form of a square, it rises to a height of 23 m, while the stone walls are as thick as 1.80 m. Three vigorously conceived pilasters connected with arches were added to each of the four sides thus improving the architectonics of the tower and enlarging the surface of the top floor where there is a chapel. Stone staircases, built into the walls, lead up to each of the five storeys. The interiors of the floors feature brick plastic work and an inscription containing the name of the church-donor Hrelyu and the year of its construction.



Wall-painting from the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Burial Ground Church (1795) with the Virgin's Akathist scene.

Wall-painting by N. Obrazopissov at the Orlitsa Convent depicting the transfer of St John of Rila's relics (1863).





The open gallery at the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church. The walls, the domes and the arches are decorated with murals. The monastery chronicles have recorded the names of many Revival Period artists who had worked there including Zahari Zograph on whose paintings the year 1844 is inscribed.

The Virgin and the Child Christ - a fresco from the open gallery of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church.



The woodcut iconostasis of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church is one of the most magnificent monuments of the Bulgarian wood-carving art. Its execution started in 1839 by A. Teladour and continued for more than five years. He was assisted by six other master-woodcarvers. Stylized birds, dragons, garden flowers, biblical scenes, human figures, lions, monsters and storks are skilfully blended. In the mid-19th century the iconostasis was laid with gold and some of its elements painted in colour.



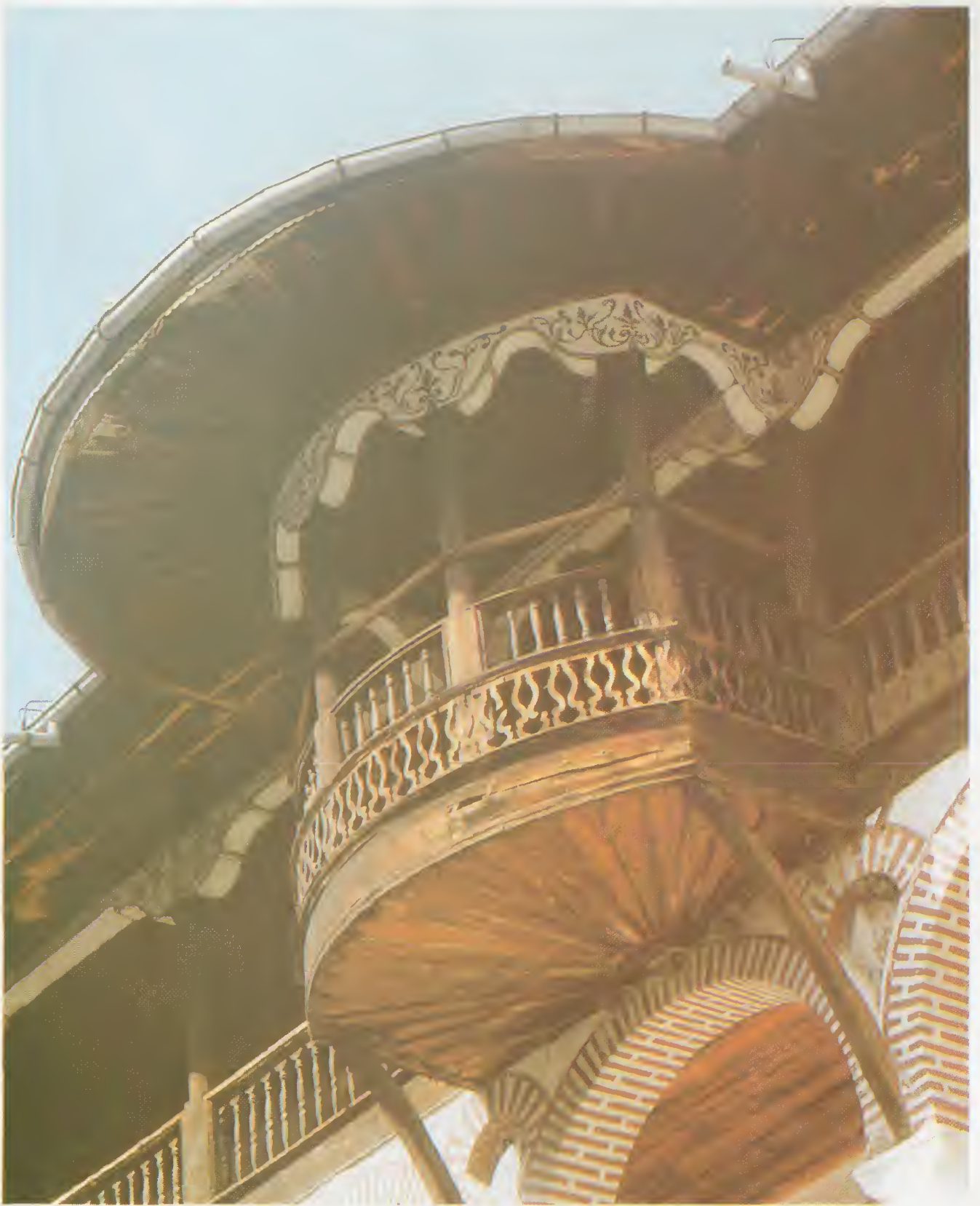


The Souchav Gospel (1656), treasured at the monastery library. The gold-plated repousse covers with figure motifs, decorative elements and multicoloured stones are a source of great interest.



Throne Cross (18th c.) from the exposition of the monastery museum, a most exquisite filigree work. Right in the middle are six rectangular wooden panels depicting miniature scenes from the Bible.





The projecting parts of the verandahs accentuate the facades overlooking the courtyard. Protruding as a separate architectonic body, they add to the exuberance and diversity of the rich architectural order of the colonades and arches above the second floor. The projections are distinguished for their ornate details and pictorial decoration on the columns, arches and cornices, prominently partaking in the artistic elaboration of the verandahs overlooking the inner courtyard.



Wall-painting from the Sts Sava and Simeon Chapel on the second floor of the eastern residential wing. The Virgin with the Child Christ composition displays refinement of painting.

Wall-painting from the open gallery of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church with the image of Virgin Mary in the middle of the composition, surrounded by a great number of angels. Beneath the underlying scene are three wall panels representing subjects from the Bible.





The Nativity of the Virgin - a 19th century icon painting treasured at the Rila Monastery museum. It is a blend of vivid colours and sophisticated composition of figures, buildings and interiors.



God Savaot - a fresco from the southern section of the narthex of the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church, painted by masters from Samokov in 1843. Townsmen from Veles made lavish donations.

Detail from the Raphael's Cross (18th c.). Miniature scene depicting the Nativity of the Virgin and St Anna on the plank-bed.





The Dormition of St John of Rila - a wall-painting from the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church. A monumental composition remarkable for the precision of drawing, numerous images and enchanting architecture with proper perspective. St John of Rila is in the middle with biblical saints and cherubim around. High up in the clouds is the Christ giving his blessings and God Savaot.

Fresco from the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church painted by masters from Samokov on the open gallery's western wall. The scene which features Archangel Michael torturing and taking the soul of the wealthy man is really impressive. Further behind are the mourners and devils against the background of a huge architectural complex of church and public buildings. Archangel Michael is in full armour, with powerful wings, red shroud and a sword in his hand.





The Raphael's Cross (18th c.) - a side of its central part with nine miniature panels of sophisticated composition, multitude of figures and architectural elements.

The Raphael's Cross (18th c.) - detail from a miniature woodwork. The sophisticated composition represents the Birth of Christ in the Bethlehem cave. Behind an architectural frame of two small columns and a second frame of peculiar form is the cave, the New-born Child, the Holy Virgin Mary, angels, guest shepherds and a font in which the New-born Christ is given a bath.





Rila Monastery. Icon painting of St Arsenius (14th-15th c.).

The Raphael's Cross - miniature woodwork. Detail from the scene depicting the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin. The three-year-old Mary is presented at the Jerusalem temple.





Rila Monastery - the Pchelino Convent. Icon painting of the Virgin Hodegetria.

The Raphael's Cross - miniature woodwork. Detail from the scene depicting the Removal from the Cross.





General view of the monastery's courtyard with the residential wings and the Nativity of the Virgin Principal Church.

Christ, the Great Bishop - a fresco from the Shroud of the Virgin Hermitage painted by Toma Vishanov in 1786. ➡

On the back cover: The Raphael's Cross (18th c.) at full height, 81 cm x 43 cm in size. The miniatures with azure and flat fretwork display 104 scenes and 650 small figures.



